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ABSTRACT

Sociocultural concerns have provided the framework for literacy expectations throughout the history of the United States, and have determined the extent to which national emphasis has been placed on adult literacy programs. Early literacy programs have been traced to the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. The next surge of interest in literacy programs came when the combined impact of immigration during the industrial revolution, the progressive reform movement, and World War I forced societal change. Other crises--the Depression and World War II--moved the federal government to action in this area. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s marked another period of societal change, accompanied by renewed interest in adult literacy. The concept of functional literacy developed during this period, which also led to a significant increase in adult literacy programs, such as the Right-to-Read program. Today, adult literacy in the workplace is increasingly important as the United States economy moves from an industrial base to an information-driven, technological base. Addressing this change, the Adult Literacy Initiative, designed to promote national awareness about adult illiteracy and encourage private sector involvement and the recruitment of volunteers, was announced in 1983 by President Reagan. Development of adult literacy programs must continue to assist and educate individuals in preparing for and adapting to the technological changes which are being implemented. (Forty-one references are appended.) (MM)

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Adult Literacy from a Sociocultural Perspective

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Introduction

A society creates the framework for its literacy expectations. Why should a person want to learn to read and write? What kinds of material does a person need to read? What are the writing requirements of adults in today's society? What does a person want to read? To a large extent, society dictates the answers to these questions. One way that culture is transmitted from generation to generation is through the written word. In the United States, people who desire to enter professions (e.g., medicine, law, education) must learn specific information in order to meet criteria set by that profession. Joining social clubs may involve learning guidelines and schedules. Wanting to learn about subjects for one's own recreation or edification will require literacy skills.

The recent surge of interest in adult literacy in the United States has once again made Americans aware of the fact that a significant number of adults have literacy levels so slow that they are unable to take full advantage of the social, political, economic and cultural opportunities offered in this country. What one must remember, however, is that this nation has always had

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adults who have not been literate; that certain groups of people have not had equal access to education, thereby exacerbating the problem; and that, historically, national attention to adult literacy has been sporadic.

This author posits that sociocultural concerns have provided the framework for literacy expectations throughout the history of the United States and have determined the extent to which national emphasis has been placed on literacy programs for adults.

Historical Perspective

By analyzing the history of adult literacy in the United States from a sociocultural construct, one is better able to clarify present thinking on the issue. Referring to literacy in Colonial times, Harman (1987) reports, "Historian Carl Kaestle estimates that approximately twenty percent of males were 'sophisticated' readers, meaning that they could read books, newspapers and almanacs." No data were given for the female population; the new nation had not yet included women in its framework for literacy expectations.

Freedom: The Emancipation Proclamation

Edwin Smith (1970) and William Miller (1958) traced early literacy programs to those instituted during the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War: the "freedom schools," which functioned from 1865 to 1869, and the free public schools, which were prescribed by the "black and tan" state conventions of 1868

and 1870. The Emancipation Proclamation was the impetus for educational policy that affected thousands of men and women newly freed from bondage. The impact of sociocultural change was immediate. Teachers at the "freedom schools" were volunteers from the families of white plantation owners; classes were held in the evening because adults worked during the day (Smith, 1970). By 1877, 600,000 blacks were enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, and the colleges of Fisk and Howard were opened (Miller, 1958). In addition, Miller notes that hundreds of night schools were opened with the goal of teaching adults to read. Booker T. Washington stated, "The great ambition of the older people was to try to learn to read the Bible before they died." (Miller, 1958).

Growth and Reform: Immigration, the Progressive Reform Movement and World War I

As people and institutions adapted to change, however, emphasis placed on teaching adults to read declined until the combined impact of the great immigration during the industrial revolution, the progressive reform movement, and World War I forced societal change. Interestingly, the industrial revolution did not produce a need for literate employees. Literacy was not a prerequisite for employment because most of the jobs could be done without having to read, write or speak English. Employment was not the focus of literacy programs. As Cook (1977) explains, the

progressive reform movement spawned the "moonlight schools." These schools were begun in Kentucky in 1911 for the purpose of educating native-born citizens and were staffed by volunteer teachers who used the weekly newspaper for instructional material because no texts were available. In 1914, Cook (1977) continues, Governor James McCreary established a state literacy commission--the first in the United States. However, no funds were appropriated for the commission. Campaigns in California, South Carolina, Alabama, North Carolina and Oklahoma were begun soon after.

The thousands of immigrants who arrived in the United States at the turn of the century and the impending world crisis caused the federal government to react to the tenor of the times. Two major pieces of legislation were passed. The Smith-Lever Act, passed in 1914, required matching funds and promoted programs to aid people in understanding farming, marketing, and family living practices: the Immigration and Nationality Act, passed in 1918, provided funds for classes in English, history, government and citizenship (Cook, 1977). Because the United States entered World War I in 1918, citizenship classes became an important federal priority as did literacy classes for members of the military. As Cook states, "Records indicated that out of the 10 million men in the first registration, approximately 700,000 were totally illiterate."

Times of Crisis: The Depression and World War II

Other crises--the Depression and World War II--moved the federal government to action. The Goldberg study, conducted from June 1, 1943 through December, 1945, involved Army trainees who were reading below the fourth-grade level. The results of this study underscored the advantages of using functional reading material and visual aids for instruction and noted several advantages inherent in the use of military settings for research in adult literacy (Goldberg, 1951). As the crisis passed, so did the national concern for literacy.

Reordering of Society: The Civil Rights Movement

The surge of interest in adult literacy that took place in the 1960's was the result of the Civil Rights Movement. One should neither forget nor minimize the importance of those times. The 1960's marked a period of national unrest; large segments of society were unsettled--it was the decade that stimulated the rebirth of a social conscience and the reordering of society;'s primary institutions.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy, along with a host of sincere women and men of vision, advocated equal rights for all people, regardless of sex, race, age, religion, or country of origin. This period saw the enactment of landmark legislation: the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962; the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964; the 1964 Library Services and Construction

Act; the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965; and the Adult Education Act of 1966 (NACAE, 1976).

Historically, legislation has often been the catalyst for the implementation of various literacy programs for adults. The enactment of law, however, appears quite different when viewed by the sociologist rather than by the jurist. As Rocher (1986) states,

> In short, a piece of legislation or a set of regulations appears to the sociologist analyzing it as the product of power struggles whose origins must be sought in the political, social and economic structures as much as in the sphere of values and ideologies. This is what might be called situating the process by which law is developed, placing it in context.

Placing legislation in context and explaining why the law says what it does are important tasks if one is to understand the status of adult literacy, not only from an historical perspective, but from a present one as well. Legislation of the 1960's led to the formulation of an abundance of programs, many of which were begun in church basements or social halls, many in community buildings and many as adult basic education classes.

Teachers were usually part-time. Some were professional teachers; many were not--some were barely more literate than the students whom they taught. Literacy volunteer groups organized and conducted classes across the United States (Laubach, 1960; Colvin, 1982). Given this montage of people and programs, it is not especially surprising that most of the recording and program

research done during those years appeared in the form of anecdotal accounts, handbooks, and descriptive statistics (Fingeret, 1984).

Yet, those tumultuous times yielded some landmark studies in adult literacy: the Cook County Project; 1962; the Norfolk Study; 1964; the Wayne County Basic Education Demonstration Programme, 1965; the Greenleigh Project; 1966; and the Buffalo Study of Adult City-Core Illiterates, 1968 (Brown, Newman, 1970).

Also, those years, according to Bhola (1969), signified the formal conceptualization of functional literacy:

> While it is difficult to give exact dates for births of concepts and ideas, the concept of functional literacy may be considered to have its ceremonial initiation at the World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy: Tehran, Iran, September, 1965.

Functional Literacy

It was 1979, however, before a truly comprehensive definition of functional literacy was written (Hunter and Harman, 1979):

> Functional literacy is the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-holders, and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing. This includes the ability to obtain information they want and to use that information for their own and others' wellbeing; the ability to read and write adequately to satisfy the requirements they set for themselves as being important for their own lives; the ability to deal positively with demands made on them by society; and the ability to solve the problems they face in their daily lives.

The thread of advances made in the 1960's was woven into the fabric of the 1970's with the creation of the Right-to-Read

program, which was to eradicate illiteracy by 1980 (Holloway, 1973). Although Right-to-Read and the subsequent Basic Skills legislation did not eliminate illiteracy as some had hoped it would, the movement, with its "adult reading academies" (Coy, 1976), did lay the foundation for many of the adult literacy programs that are operating today. In addition, these programs often served as field sites for testing some of the more important developments in literacy, such as the Life Skills materials (Adkins, 1970), the Literacy Instructor Training LIT-TV series (Newman, Parer, 1978), and the Adult Performance Level APL materials (Northcutt, 1977). Mikulecky (1987) notes at least four major functional literacy studies that were conducted throughout the 1970's--separate studies by Harris, Murphy, Gadway & Wilson, and Sticht et al.

The work of Sticht, Caylor, Kern, and Fox (1972) in military settings is particularly impressive because it has prompted further research into determining literacy requirements inherent in various occupational settings. Moe, Rush, and Storlie (1979), for example, assessed specific literacy requirements in both on-the-job and training programs for a number of civilian occupations. Results of these studies clearly show that "reading-to-do" tasks differ significantly from generalized reading tasks (i.e., school reading), and have implications for educators as to what will and what will not work.

Uniting for a Competitive America: Literacy in the Workplace

Adult literacy in the workplace has become an increasingly important theme as the economy of the United States moves from a strong industrial base to an information-driven, technological base. The alarm sounded long ago, however, when Curry (1976) warned,

> Automation, brought about by advanced technology, has reduced the demands in our society for unskilled workers. Today, less than five percent of all jobs are available to the unskilled worker.

In 1982 the alarm again sounded when John Naisbett (1982) cautioned that the United States is suspended between an industrial era and an informational era, noting that training and flexibility will be major challenges for the next two decades. He also foresaw the "megatrend" movement from a national economy to a world economy, which seems even more likely in light of the fact that Europe's Common Market removes remaining barriers to world trade in 1992.

To remain competitive in the world market, business and industry realize that a skilled, literate workforce is needed. For many corporations, this fact translates into a need for basic skills.

Adult Literacy Initiative

President Reagan and Secretary T. Bell announced the Adult Literacy Initiative (ALI) in September, 1983. This initiative was

preceded by the formation of the Coalition for Literacy. Newman (1986, p. 180) reports,

> The Coalition for Literacy was formed in 1981 under the leadership of the American Library Association to alert the public to the problems of adult illiteracy in the United States. The 11-member Executive committee, comprised of representatives from the American Library Association and 10 other literacy-concerned groups in the United States, applied to and was accepted by the Advertising Council (1982) to develop a national media campaign in the interest of adult literacy: (1) to raise the awareness of problems confronting functionally illiterate adults; and (2) to increase the human, site, and funding resources available to combat the problems of the functionally illiterate adult.

In setting the goals of the Adult Literacy Initiative, the federal government conferred with functioning literacy groups as verified by a White House press release (USDOE, 1986) which states, "In these [volunteer] efforts, ALI worked closely with such organizations as Laubach Literacy Action, Literacy Volunteers of America, the Coalition for Literacy, American Library Association, and others active in literacy efforts."

Goals of the ALI are to promote national awareness of adult illiteracy; to encourage public sector involvement and volunteer recruitment; to coordinate intra- and inter-agency activities; and to strengthen networking activities.

Although the ALI has no legislative mandate or grant-making authority, it has certainly encouraged present national interest in promoting adult literacy activities. Examples of that varied interest include the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) and Project PLUS. BCEL, a public-supported charity, was

spearheaded by Harold McGraw (McGraw-Hill Books) in 1984. A monthly newsletter keeps business leaders and educators informed on programs, trends, and issues in adult literacy. PLUS, (Project Literacy in the United States) is a collaborative effort between ABC-TV and PBS-TV designed to create public awareness of the problem of adult illiteracy.

Toward the Twentieth Century: Recommendations

Research findings of the last two decades have yielded much data concerning what will and what will not work in solving the many problems surrounding adult illiteracy in the United States. Fingeret (1984) notes that several leading educators have suggested strengthening the research base in adult literacy (Micklos, 1982; Diehl, 1979). That the research base in the field of adult literacy has lacked sufficient quantifiable data may be attributed to many factors, not the least of which is that the surge of interest in adult literacy nationally has come and gone in varying cycles as revealed by its history. According to Fingeret (1984), "Quantitative methods are most useful when variables can be isolated and context is stable--conditions that rarely occur in the dynamic and complex field of literacy education."

Therein may be part of the answer. Student assessment should be approached from an andragogical base (Knowles, 1984) and the evaluation of learners' progress should move toward qualifiable measures such as goal attainment. Program design may employ

instructional systems models (Bhola, 1984), and the evaluation of projects may utilize naturalistic inquiry (Guba, Lincoln 1985). By expanding the data base to include qualitative measures, educators may obtain a clearer picture of the adult learner.

Researchers, such as A.P. Newman, are refining ways to determine the best strategies for teaching reading to adult low-level learners. Computer-Assisted-Instruction (CAI), which integrates strategy, curriculum and materials holds much promise for teaching adults in the workplace. Computer-Managed-Instruction (CMI) may facilitate program research by simplifying data collection.

Researchers are able to perform literacy audits of basic skills needed in the workplace (Mikulecky, Drew 1988). The importance of basic skills in the workplace can not be overemphasized. As James Duffy, President of Communications, ABC Broadcasting (The Bottom Line, 1988) comments,

> No issue is as critical to the future of America as illiteracy in the workforce. We simply cannot allow this nation to enter the 21st century without a literate, skilled and flexible workforce. From individual business to entire industries, the effect of a workforce unprepared for an information-based, service-oriented economy will be devastating.

Lastly, Fingeret (1984) suggests that universities become more involved in adult literacy, which will require "rethinking of the role the university has played so far in supporting the development of adult basic education programs."

Summary

When one considers that the United States is a vast country, barely 200 years old, which has recently completed exploring its own geography and settling its own interiors, it is not surprising that the needs of society in general have been varied and many. Seldom has a country accepted and assimilated large groups of people from other lands while establishing a government that would best reflect the democratic philosophy of its origin. Seldom has a young country weathered the unwelcome strife of war conducted both on its land and on foreign shores.

Now this nation is facing another challenge--a major change in its economic structure and base. This change is affecting business, industry and agriculture in various ways. Outdated plants and equipment are being eliminated. Facilities and hardware for new technology are being researched, tested and purchased. Ways to assist and educate people in preparing for and adapting to these changes are being explored and implemented.

From a sociocultural construct, adult literacy may be analyzed through the value and belief system that is operating in the legislative and policy-making areas of society. Faced with a very real need to focus on basic skills in the workplace, leaders realize that national emphasis on adult literacy is an important part of this total picture. If educators are to make a difference in the area of adult literacy, it is imperative that long-range,

ongoing, consistent planning be done in program development, assessment and evaluation. This means commitment--commitment at the federal level, at the state level, and at the local level; commitment by business, industry and the educational institutions charged with the mission of educating the citizens of this country.

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